



Nineteenth session

ASSISTANCE IN CASES OF NATURAL DISASTER*

Report of the Secretary-GeneralIntroduction

1. At its thirty-seventh session the Economic and Social Council adopted resolution 1049 (XXXVII) entitled "Assistance in cases of natural disaster". The preamble to that resolution recognized that, "while limited resources are available for such assistance to certain specialized agencies and operating programmes, the Secretary-General has no funds at his disposal to offer assistance in cases of natural disaster". It also recalled the Council's request, at its thirty-sixth session,^{1/} that the Secretary-General should take the lead in establishing, in conjunction with the specialized agencies and the League of Red Cross Societies, appropriate arrangements for assistance in rapid and concerted relief and construction in cases of natural disaster, and noted with approval the arrangements for inter-agency co-ordination in this field set out in the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth reports of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination.^{2/} The

* Item 46 of the provisional agenda.

1/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Thirty-Sixth Session, Supplement No. 1 (E/3816), p. 39.

2/ Ibid., Annexes, agenda item 4, document E/3765, and *ibid.*, Thirty-Seventh Session, Annexes, agenda item 6, document E/3886. It should be noted also that the Economic and Social Council's Committee on Housing, Building and Planning has requested a study on the reconstruction of housing and community facilities in cases of natural disaster. The Social Commission has given high priority to this study in the work programme for 1963-1965.

first operative paragraph of the resolution requests the Secretary-General to study, in consultation with the international organizations concerned:

- (a) The types of assistance which it might be appropriate for the United Nations to provide;
- (b) The order of magnitude of the resources that the Secretary-General might require for this purpose;
- (c) Alternative methods of providing such resources, including the establishment of a United Nations fund for assistance in cases of natural disaster, financed through voluntary contributions.

The council then requested the Secretary-General to submit his report for consideration by the General Assembly at its nineteenth session. The present report has been prepared in accordance with this request.

2. In recent years the United Nations has received numerous appeals for assistance as a result of natural disasters that have occurred in developing countries. As a result of these appeals, a number of resolutions have been adopted by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. Reference may be made in particular to the following: Economic and Social Council resolution 766 (XXX) of 8 July 1960 on measures to be adopted in connexion with the earthquakes in Chile;^{1/} General Assembly resolution 1753 (XVII) of 5 October 1962 on measures to be adopted in connexion with the earthquake in Iran; Economic and Social Council resolution 930 (XXXV) of 3 April 1963 on earthquake relief to Libya, flood relief to Morocco and relief to Indonesia consequent on the volcanic eruption in Bali; Economic and Social Council resolution 970 (XXXVI) of 29 July 1963 on measures to be adopted in connexion with the earthquake at Skoplje, Yugoslavia; General Assembly resolution 1882 (XVIII) of 14 October 1963 on measures in connexion with the earthquake at Skoplje, Yugoslavia; General Assembly resolution 1888 (XVIII) of 1 November 1963 on measures in connexion with the hurricane which had struck the territories of Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago; and Economic and Social Council resolution 1014 (XXXVII) of 28 July 1964 on emergency aid to Costa Rica.

3. These resolutions followed much the same pattern. The Assembly or the Council, after expressing its sympathy with the stricken country, invited further

^{1/} The Council adopted this resolution after considering the report of the third extraordinary session of the Committee of the Whole of the Economic Commission for Latin America (E/3402).

assistance from Member States; invited aid from the specialized agencies, the World Food Programme and non-governmental organizations; recommended that the Technical Assistance Committee, the Technical Assistance Board and the Executive Chairman of the Board take particular account of the needs of the country concerned when allocating available resources; and requested the Managing Director and the Governing Council of the Special Fund to give sympathetic consideration to requests submitted by the Government of the country in connexion with reconstruction or rehabilitation. In the case of Costa Rica, a trust fund into which voluntary contributions might be paid had earlier been set up by the Secretary-General under regulation 6.6 of the Financial Regulations of the United Nations at the request of the Costa Rican Government.

4. Generally, the resolutions of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council - in so far as they were addressed to agencies and organs of the United Nations system - were confined to recommendations regarding possible allocations from certain funds known to be of very limited proportions and already heavily committed. Nevertheless, the results have not been inconsiderable. They range from the provision of emergency medical supplies by the World Health Organization (WHO), as in the case of Cuba and Somalia, and of such items as food, clothing and blankets by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), as in the case of Pakistan and Haiti, to a sizable technical assistance programme which followed the earthquake in Chile in 1960. A large number of experts were provided to Chile under that programme by ten organizations in the United Nations system. Substantial help to Indonesia in connexion with the Mount Agung eruption followed a United Nations/FAO/UNICEF mission to Bali to assess the needs and make recommendations; a United Nations mission to Iran helped plan reconstruction after the 1961 earthquake; assistance to Skoplje by a large number of organizations, including a Special Fund project for the Skoplje Urban Plan. In the period from October 1962 to November 1964 the United Nations/FAO World Food Programme approved natural disasters emergency food aid valued at over \$10 million. The Secretary-General would also wish to place on record that, in the case of every major disaster, a private collection has been organized among the Headquarters officials of the United Nations Secretariat. An aggregate of some \$26,700, together in some cases with clothing, etc., was collected in this way in 1963. Similar

collections have been made from time to time at the regional and other overseas offices of the United Nations as well as in other organizations in the United Nations family.

5. General Assembly resolution 1888 (XVIII) in its third operative paragraph contains a specific request to the Secretary-General and the executive heads of the United Nations agencies concerned "... to provide assistance, in connexion with rehabilitation plans, from available resources, obtaining where necessary the authorization of the governing bodies of their respective organizations". Limited assistance was in fact quickly forthcoming from the World Food Programme, UNICEF, WHO and to a minor extent from other agencies. From reports which have reached the Secretary-General, however, it would appear that false hopes were raised among the countries that had been victims of hurricane Flora that there were large available resources that could be redistributed and that a substantial proportion of the total costs of rehabilitation could thus be met by the international organizations. These misunderstandings, which have also arisen in connexion with earlier decisions of the Assembly and the Council, have convinced the Secretary-General that the implications of any action by the main legislative organs of the United Nations in regard to disaster relief should be carefully weighed and the nature of that action clearly stated.

Present resources of the United Nations family that can be used in cases of natural disaster

6. It may be useful at this point to consider briefly the resources within the United Nations family that are either specifically earmarked for use in cases of disaster or can be employed in various ways to help a country that has been the victim of a catastrophe.

(a) Resources specifically reserved for assistance of natural disaster

7. The most substantial resources now available within the United Nations system that are specifically reserved for emergency use are those of the United Nations/FAO World Food Programme. At the present time 25 per cent of the Programme's resources, or approximately \$7 million a year in commodities and cash to pay for their movement can be used for this purpose at the discretion of the Director General of FAO. The current programme expires on 31 December 1965 and the question of

future arrangements will be considered by the General Assembly of the United Nations and the Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) next year. The fairly extensive experience already gained in this field by the World Food Programme indicates that it is usually unnecessary for it to make substantial quantities of food available on the spot at the first emergency stage of a disaster since assistance is almost always immediately available from Governments and voluntary agencies. The most constructive role of the World Food Programme lies in the intermediate phase, which can last for several months following a disaster (for instance, when earthquake victims are lodged in tents or other temporary accommodation pending resettlement), or during the reconstruction stage (for instance, in providing food for workers rebuilding a damaged town).

8. The constitution of WHO authorizes, in addition to technical assistance, the furnishing of necessary aid in emergencies upon the request or acceptance of Governments and requires the establishment of a special fund, to be used at the discretion of the Executive Board, to meet emergencies and unforeseen contingencies. The Executive Board has defined an emergency as a situation which implies unforeseen, serious and immediate threats to public health. In such cases WHO's assistance is limited to the provision of technical personnel and urgently needed supplies and equipment. In all such assistance WHO maintains day-to-day collaboration with the League of Red Cross Societies. Acting as technical advisers, WHO staff may assist in organizing and co-ordinating emergency health work in the country. They can generally make a rapid technical assessment of health needs on the spot and arrange immediate movement of medical supplies and equipment. It is WHO's practice to purchase supplies and equipment on behalf of Member States on a reimbursable basis, making a small service charge. In emergencies, this service is performed without charge and limited credit for essential purchases may be extended on request. The Executive Board's Special Fund to meet emergencies amounts to \$100,000. Its use requires the approval of a majority of the members of the Executive Board, although in exceptionally urgent emergency cases a decision may be made by the Director-General in collaboration with only the Chairman of the Board. In most cases WHO's aid in emergencies is provided by adapting or expanding its assistance to Governments under existing programmes. Provision for

rehabilitation and reconstruction can be made within these normal programmes, whose orderly development is safeguarded so far as possible in arrangements for emergency aid.

9. Under the regular programme the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has available \$15,000 for sending emergency missions of experts to areas affected by severe earthquake or volcanic eruption immediately after their occurrence. The objectives of these missions are essentially scientific and technical, being in the case of earthquakes the investigation of seismotectonic causes of seism and analysis of behaviour of buildings and structures under seismic stress. Studies thus carried out within a few days of a severe earthquake provide indispensable data for earthquake resistant reconstruction in the affected area.

10. UNICEF has a special fund of \$25,000 reserved for use in emergencies. The Executive Director may draw on the fund at his discretion. It is intended for aid in the \$5,000 to \$15,000 range. For large and more serious emergencies, the Executive Director seeks a decision of the Executive Board by mail poll. In some cases it is possible to divert to the scene of a disaster supplies intended for the regular programme, subject to their replacement. The policy of the Executive Board, however, is to leave the emergency phase as far as possible to relief agencies and rather to provide assistance at the reconstruction or rehabilitation stage.

11. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has at his disposal an emergency fund for refugee relief with a ceiling of \$500,000. While this is designed for dealing with refugee emergencies rather than natural disasters, it has happened occasionally - as at Agadir and Skoplje - that refugees were among the victims of a natural disaster. On these occasions the High Commissioner has been able to make an allocation from his emergency fund for assistance to the refugee victims.

(b) Other resources that can be drawn upon following a catastrophe

12. Substantial allocations have been made out of the contingency fund of the Executive Chairman of the Technical Assistance Board for technical assistance at early stages following various natural disasters. Allocations have varied

widely. As an indication of their volume, it may be mentioned that the disasters which occurred in 1963 and 1964, and which are referred to in paragraph 2 above, have led to allocations totalling \$557,000. Such aid is used mainly to finance teams of experts to help draw up plans for rehabilitation or reconstruction. Allocations for similar purposes have been made under the regular technical assistance programmes of the United Nations and certain of the specialized agencies.

13. Aid on a more extensive scale is available at a later stage from the United Nations itself as well as from certain of the specialized agencies when projects of post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction come to be included in the programmes of the country concerned supported by the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (EPTA) and UNICEF or are accepted for assistance by the Special Fund. Aid in such reconstruction may also be forthcoming from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Development Association (IDA), as well as from the World Food Programme.

14. At different stages of the operations referred to in paragraphs 6 and 12 above, voluntary organizations usually provide substantial assistance and co-operation.

Gaps in the present arrangements

15. The problems raised by major disasters have at least three distinct aspects: (a) the immediate and urgent problem of rescue, of caring for the sick and wounded, and of providing for the safety, welfare and health of survivors; (b) the provision of temporary shelter, relief and essential services, such as sanitation for families rendered homeless until they can be rehabilitated in permanent locations; and (c) the problem of long-range planning and reconstruction of the devastated areas, the development of new areas when required, and the resettlement of the homeless families in them. These three aspects pose very different problems, which require not only the application of different techniques, but also call for different forms of assistance. They do not, however, always or even usually represent distinct and separable stages. Experience has shown, for example, that basic decisions are likely to be made, and expert advice is accordingly needed, on rehabilitation or reconstruction within a few days of the occurrence of a disaster.

16. It will have been noted that the major emphasis of the present arrangements within the United Nations system is on the second and third aspects referred to in the preceding paragraph, namely, rehabilitation and reconstruction. It is to be hoped that with an enlargement of the operational resources available to the United Nations and the strengthening of certain services such as those dealing with earthquake-resistant housing, the scope of such assistance can be extended. There is, on the other hand, a major gap in the United Nations present and prospective arrangements, namely, the almost complete absence - apart from the limited possibilities offered by UNICEF and the World Food Programme to meet certain special needs - of resources which can be used to help meet emergency needs at the first impact of a disaster. This was indeed the gap which was most seriously felt after the Flora hurricane and to which the discussions in the General Assembly at its eighteenth session and the Economic and Social Council at its thirty-seventh session were primarily directed.

17. Immediately following a major disaster appeals are customarily launched for international aid from both governmental and private sources. Part of the response is normally made directly, on a bilateral basis, between donor Governments and the Governments of the stricken countries; part is channelled through voluntary agencies, especially the Red Cross. For many years past, substantial contributions in both cash and kind for emergency aid to victims of disasters throughout the world have been forthcoming through the League of Red Cross Societies. The League, unlike the United Nations and the various agencies within the United Nations family, is specialized in the provision and co-ordination of such emergency aid, for which the Secretary-General considers that it should continue to assume major responsibility.

18. While the aggregate of emergency aid which is immediately available at the outbreak of a disaster is usually adequate, this has not always been so and in many cases particular needs, including some extremely urgent ones, could not be met. The Secretary-General has been in touch not only with the specialized agencies concerned but also with the League of Red Cross Societies in regard to the forms and types of assistance which might most usefully be given by the United Nations in the emergency phase following a natural disaster.

19. In a letter to which the Secretary-General attaches much importance, the Secretary-General of the League of Red Cross Societies describes the forms and types of emergency assistance which he would hope the United Nations could provide:

"The first concerns the need for sending quickly trained staff to the scene of a disaster, to assist representatives of the local government, the Red Cross, etc., in fields where special technical skills, usually not to be found with Red Cross delegates or other general relief experts, are necessary. This does not usually mean medical experts who can be provided by the Red Cross and/or WHO, nor experts on mass feeding, shelter and evacuation. But it has been proven during recent disasters that sometimes special technical skill is needed, for instance, for saving victims caught under earthquake destroyed houses, and for other immediate rescue work which needs a special technique for flood control, for arranging of emergency transport by helicopter, etc. These experts might usually be found in technical government services, within the military establishment, with great construction and mining firms, etc., and the interested agencies, in their normal activities, very often lack the possibilities to find, engage and pay such experts, even for short-term missions, which indicates the need for outside help.

"The second matter concerns the need, in connexion with what is mentioned above, of special technical equipment during the first stage of a rescue action. This could be mining-type equipment for determining the location of and bringing help to buried victims, earth-moving equipment, hiring of helicopters for short-time survey jobs, etc. For these purposes no funds are usually immediately available through the relief agencies. The ordinary process here would probably be to try to mobilize this material on loan from governmental authorities, military establishments, or construction or mining firms, etc., but it has been proven that situations have existed where it had been necessary to buy and fly out special equipment, especially to disaster areas in countries under development, or to hire it on a commercial basis.

"The third and equally important sector concerns one of the basic flaws in the present disaster system, namely, the lack, in many countries, of an adequate disaster plan. Much of the confusion and over-lapping in a disaster situation has been caused by the fact that the stricken countries themselves have not been prepared for a disaster; they have not decided which central authority should have the over-all responsibility, they have not constituted disaster relief committees or commissions where a proper planning should take place, or, as has happened in some cases, formally given the responsibility to an agency like the National Red Cross. For this purpose - pre-disaster planning on the national level - there exists valuable experience from several countries in the "disaster belt" of the world. It is obvious that you cannot raise the interest of the public for this pre-disaster planning in the same way you can do for immediate help after a disaster, and that is why economic assistance would be welcome.

The Red Cross disposes of a number of persons able to help with such planning; there might also exist people outside the Red Cross with qualities for it, but it is very difficult to raise, on a private basis, means for the financing of these experts and their missions. The authority of the United Nations would also be very valuable in getting the respective governments to understand the need of this pre-disaster planning."

20. The Secretary-General finds himself in broad agreement with these suggestions, and submits them for the consideration of the General Assembly. The provision of experts fits into the normal operations of the United Nations and should cause no difficulty, although special procedures would have to be worked out for dealing with emergency situations. There is a good deal of relevant experience and know-how in the staffs of the United Nations and certain specialized agencies, which can be drawn upon in case of need. Rosters could be established and kept up-to-date of outside experts in certain relevant fields who could be approached when needed, if funds were available. As regards the provision of equipment, the United Nations action would, for obvious financial reasons, be confined to using its good offices vis-à-vis Governments, private business and voluntary organizations though it might be able on occasion to meet some of the supporting costs involved (e.g. provision of expert personnel to work the equipment). Pre-disaster planning, still lamentably inadequate in many countries, and the setting up of appropriate national machinery for handling disaster relief, are matters of high priority. The Secretary-General fully shares the hope that Governments, in consultation with the League of Red Cross Societies and other competent bodies, will draw up comprehensive disaster relief plans so as to ensure that in the event of a disaster the optimum use is made of available national and international assistance.

21. The Secretary-General attaches importance to expansion of United Nations activities in the field of planning in close association with the League. It may be noted that the Economic and Social Council, by resolutions 767 (XXX) and 912 (XXXIV) on international co-operation in the field of seismological research, has endeavoured to promote the establishment of warning systems and the construction of earthquake-resistant housing. The Secretary-General feels there is more that can be done along these lines, on both the technological and the administrative planes. As one step in this direction the United Nations in

collaboration with the League might prepare a manual on pre-disaster planning and later make expert advice available to countries requesting assistance in formulating such plans. Since decisions affecting rehabilitation and reconstruction begin to be taken at a very early stage, arrangements have been made for consultation and co-operation between the League and the United Nations family from the outbreak of an emergency.

Magnitude of resources required by the United Nations for emergency aid and methods of providing such resources

22. In considering the proposals to be put before the General Assembly in response to the Economic and Social Council resolution 1049 (XXXVII), the Secretary-General has felt it necessary to take full account of the present financial position of the United Nations. While the total impact of a natural disaster on the economy of a developing country often runs into huge sums, and aid from the United Nations on a very much larger scale than has hitherto been possible could well be justified, the Secretary-General believes that a useful contribution can be made by the United Nations to emergency aid, along the lines suggested by the League of Red Cross Societies, with quite modest additional resources. The initial maximum figure which he envisages is \$100,000 a year, with a limit of \$20,000 probably necessary in respect of any one disaster in a given country.

23. The Council asked the Secretary-General to consider, among possible methods of providing the additional resources, the establishment of a United Nations fund for assistance in cases of natural disaster, to be financed through voluntary contributions. He has reached the conclusion that the possible advantages of such a fund would be outweighed by its disadvantages. In the first place, the World Food Programme, part of whose objectives it is to provide assistance in cases of natural disaster, as well as the EPTA, the Special Fund and UNICEF are all supported by voluntary contributions. Unless the need for it could be quite overwhelmingly demonstrated, the Secretary-General would hesitate to envisage the creation of an additional voluntary fund for disaster relief within the United Nations structure, fearing the effect that creation of such a fund might have on contributions to the existing United Nations funds just mentioned. Secondly, he feels that with such a very small total commitment as is now proposed for United Nations emergency aid in cases of natural disaster, all members will be willing to contribute through ...

the regular budget. Thirdly, he has inevitably been influenced by the experience of the League of Nations, under whose aegis an International Relief Union was established in 1927.

24. The objects of the International Relief Union were defined as follows:

"(1) In the event of any disaster due to force majeure, the exceptional gravity of which exceeds the limits of the powers and resources of the stricken people, to furnish to the suffering population first aid and to assemble for this purpose funds, resources and assistance of all kinds;

"(2) In the event of any public disaster, to co-ordinate as occasion offers the efforts made by relief organizations, and, in a general way, to encourage the study of prevention measures against disasters and to induce all peoples to render mutual international assistance."

The permanent and central services of the International Relief Union were to be provided by the International Red Cross. The Union had at its disposal an "initial fund" of contributions from States parties to its Convention, which also provided for voluntary contributions from governmental and private sources, including contributions for particular disasters.

25. In practice, the International Relief Union has never had sufficient funds to play the role foreseen by its Convention. Voluntary contributions were not readily forthcoming and interest on the "initial fund" has constituted virtually its only source of income. Apart from making small grants in certain cases of disaster, its activities have been restricted to the studies provided for in the article quoted above.

26. The practical disadvantages of a disaster fund paid up in advance have also been pointed out by the Secretary-General of the League of Red Cross Societies. Donors are generally hesitant to put up large sums against the hypothesis of a disaster occurring. Furthermore, a disaster fund, even if established with a low ceiling, has the effect of inhibiting further contributions when a disaster is reported, since donors tend to rely on the fund meeting at least the most immediate requirements.

27. Among the various possible alternatives to the creation of a voluntary United Nations disaster fund, the Secretary-General considers that - particularly in view of the contingent character of the proposed expenditure - an authorization to draw on the Working Capital Fund offers overwhelming advantages. He therefore wishes

to propose that, for the purpose of implementing the recommendations in paragraphs 16 to 18 above, he be authorized to draw from the Working Capital Fund in the amounts mentioned earlier, that is to say, up to a total of \$100,000 for emergency aid in any year, with a normal ceiling of \$20,000 per country in the case of any one disaster. Any additional expenditure would require prior approval of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions.

Criteria, procedures and administrative measures

28. Certain criteria would need to be met before assistance under the arrangements suggested could be sanctioned by the Secretary-General. He feels, first, that emergency aid should in principle be made available only in the case of a major disaster, although this is not a term which can be precisely defined. Secondly, assistance should depend upon a request from the Government concerned. Thirdly, when resources are so limited, they should be made available only in a situation where they were clearly essential, and where, without United Nations assistance, some important need could not be met. The essence of the proposals put forward in this report lies in co-ordinating action with other organizations within the United Nations family and the League of Red Cross Societies. Before taking action on any request for emergency aid, therefore, the Secretary-General would be guided by the advice both of the resident representative (acting as the "focal point" for the United Nations family in the country concerned) and of the League of Red Cross Societies. The granting of assistance in respect of rehabilitation and reconstruction would of course continue to be governed by the existing procedures.

29. The arrangements suggested would not call for any far-reaching administrative measures. However, in order that they may be effectively carried out, the Secretary-General would ensure that the necessary staff was available to work on questions of disaster assistance, including co-operation with the other agencies of the United Nations System and the League of Red Cross Societies. Initially, at any rate, these requirements would be met out of existing staff resources.

30. The Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1049 (XXXVII) did not confine itself to the subjects which have been dealt with in the present paper. In the last paragraph of the resolution, it also requested the Secretary-General "to consider possible improvements in the arrangements for co-ordinating international

assistance ...". The general question of co-ordination will be the subject of a separate report which the Secretary-General will submit to the Council at its thirty-ninth session. One aspect of it, namely, arrangements for co-ordinating action among the United Nations programmes, has already been extensively discussed in the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC). Attention is drawn to a recent report of the ACC (E/3886) where agreement is reported on the designation of a "focal point" in each country - normally the resident representative of the Technical Assistance Board and the Special Fund - in connexion with emergency action in cases of natural disaster. The responsibilities of the resident representative would include the exchange of information on the plans and activities of the Governments and of the various agencies concerned. Of particular importance, however, is the fact that the resident representative is in a position to inform the competent government officials at the time of a disaster whether and to what extent assistance through the United Nations organizations or programmes could, under their respective terms of reference, be made available. Here again it may prove necessary to draw on available staff resources to assist the resident representative over a short period in carrying out these tasks when a major disaster occurs.

31. In conclusion, the Secretary-General wishes to re-emphasize the importance he attaches to Governments ensuring that there is a comprehensive disaster relief plan for their countries. Such a plan, which should include a clear distribution of responsibilities in the event of a disaster, is a condition of making outside assistance effective.
